

China plays game of unpredictability, India falls for it¹

Have you heard of 'atsaras'? They are important characters in the Tibetan monastic dance, the Cham. The traditional esoteric dance of Tibet is a sort of initiation for ordinary folks to the highest mysteries of Mahayana Buddhism. Lay spectators and monks assemble once in a year to witness the battle between good and evil.

As the drama reaches its climax and the fate of the heroes can tilt one way or another, a 'fool' arrives on the stage, uttering outrageous views, shocking the public, sometime making the public cry, sometime laugh; the clownish appearance of the atsaras reminds the spectators of the relativity of 'life and death' and even 'liberation'.

The Chinese political version of the 'atsara' is best enacted by the periodic appearance on the scene of well-trained 'generals', who not really important actors in the play, but remind us of the relativity of 'peace and war'.

Such 'joker' is Major General Luo Yuan. He plays an important role when the Chinese government needs to divert attention from its own mistakes or shortcomings or when it needs "to frighten the monkeys by threatening the chickens".

A website on the South China Sea dispute explains that the prominence of Luo Yuan "in the media is very much a result of consensus at the top of both the military and the Party that it is beneficial to have a hardline attack dog. The logic is strong: official-ish voices, those of like Luo and other hawkish paramilitary figures such as Major-General Zhang Zhaozhong of National Defense University, add a layer of unpredictability to Chinese foreign policy, à la North Korea's antics."

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As Defence Minister AK Antony was landing in Beijing, 'atsara' Luo Yuan warned Delhi that it should be careful with its words and deeds. Luo threatened: "India is the only country in the world enhancing its military prowess while citing China as a threat perception." He thundered: "India should not provoke new problems, increase military deployment at the border areas and stir up new problems."

General Luo, who serves in the Department of World Military Research in the PLA's Academy of Military Sciences reminded the Indian public: "90,000 square kilometres of Chinese territory are still occupied by the Indian side."

Adding that as a military person, it was his 'sacred mission' to protect China's territorial sovereignty.

Luo Yuan's utterances were a great media success in India in the sense that each and every newspaper or TV channel reported his 'threat'. He had won the battle to destabilize India's mild defence minister; and made sure that Antony does not ask too many questions about what happened in the Depsang Plain in Ladakh in April and why the PLA had suddenly decided to set up some tents on Indian territory. Obviously Beijing was embarrassed by its own non-respect of the bilateral border mechanisms in place since 1993.

The 'joker' had played his role on the stage, the main characters can continue on a peace-footing.

In February, Luo Yuan had made his debut on *Sina Weibo*, China's Twitter. The Japanese newspaper *Asahi Shimbun* said that Luo started 'a big blitz and an ensuing war-in-words, just a true military should do.'

Luo had written that if a conflict erupts, China "Will Bomb Tokyo and take the 130 thousand Japanese citizens in China as hostages."

Feng Wei, a Chinese scholar at Fudan University and Japan expert commented: "China is large—nothing is too bizarre. It's not inconceivable that lunatics like Luo Yuan and Dai Xu [a PLA Air Force Colonel known for his militarism] would appear. But even the most extremist, rightist, anti-China military personnel in Japan would not make crazy statements like 'Bomb Beijing' that would astonish the entire world."

General Luo immediately answered Feng and continued his tirade to entertain his 'audience'.

The blog of the South China Sea dispute explained: "the CCP is so confident of its control of domestic nationalist opinion that it doesn't feel like it's playing with fire at all when it allows mass outpourings of support for Luo and criticism of the policy status quo online."

After his first meetings in Beijing, AK Antony brushed aside Luo's statement: "My discussions were with the official people." *The Times of India* pointed out: "Antony's response suggested the Chinese leadership may have distanced themselves from Maj Gen Luo's comments".

Obviously, the entry of the 'atsara' on the stage was only part of the script.

The recent Chinese incursion at Depsang was being discussed in detail, assured the Indian Defence Minister; he was at his vague best. He added that he was satisfied with his discussions with the Chinese leadership. "The [Chinese] PM again reiterated that the new leadership in China gives much importance to strengthening and expanding the relations with India." Great play on stage!

Perhaps more important but unnoticed by the Indian media, Beijing announced that Tibet has a new Military Area Commander.

Major General Xu Yong, born in 1959 in Shaanxi province took over from Lt. Gen. Yang Jinshan, a member of the powerful Party's Central Committee.

Xu Yong's fame came when he directed the rescue operations after the 2008 earthquake in Wenchuan (Sichuan). In the aftermath of the earthquake, 69,197 people were confirmed dead and 374,176 injured, while 18,222 listed were as missing.

His predecessor in Tibet has been promoted as a Deputy Commander of the strategic Chengdu Military Region (MR). He will probably oversee the Indian border.

Lt General Li Zuocheng, former Deputy Commander of Chengdu MR replaces Lt. Gen. Li Shiming who was commanding the MR since September 2007.

Interestingly, the Tibet Military Area (or District) has also a new Political Commissar, Maj. Gen. Diao Guoxin who for many years has been posted in Chengdu MR and is therefore familiar with the Indian border.

These are the people to watch carefully in the months to come, as they are the 'real' generals dealing with the LAC in Arunachal Pradesh.

By the way, what was the purpose of visit to China of Mr. Antony so soon after the one of the Special Representative for the border issue?